

Writing in American Studies

Success in our courses depends, in large measure, on writing well. The faculty thinks of American Studies as a “writing major,” and you can expect writing assignments in our courses that will prepare you for the more substantial writing required in the department’s capstone sequence, AMST340 and AMST450.

Writing is also important for the careers you will pursue after graduation, wherever life may take you. A Conference Board survey, conducted in 2006, found that over 90% of employers considered written communication skills to be “very important” and judged over 25% of four-year college graduates to be “deficient” in those skills. Other surveys have reported a higher level of employer dissatisfaction with the writing skills of recent college graduates.

Sloppy writing can leave the impression of sloppy thinking. In your American Studies courses, you will be encouraged to write clearly, precisely, coherently, and directly, employing correct grammar and punctuation. We will expect you to gain skill in your ability to summarize an argument accurately and effectively, to define concepts (e.g. “hegemony,” “intersectionality,” “discourse”) clearly and precisely, and to support your reasoning with appropriate evidence. You will gain skill and confidence in your ability to formulate an argument of your own as you develop an independent research project in AMST340 and write your senior thesis in AMST450. The ability to write well is an essential element of your “cultural capital,” and your course work in the department is intended to nourish and refine that ability.

Your instructor is your best source for suggestions on how to improve your writing skills, but the campus Writing Center offers expert advice. Appointments can be made online at www.english.umd.edu/academics/writingcenter.

Our goal, in short, is to encourage steady, recognizable improvement in your writing skills as you fulfill the requirements for the major, culminating in your senior thesis. “Words are deeds,” according to the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. We hope that your deeds, in this sense, will gain in clarity and power as you complete the major and move into the world of work and its demands for effective communication.

November 2011